

BS”D

The Receiving of the Law

An Interpretation of a painting by Marc Chagall

R. Mois Navon (work in progress)



Chagall is known for often simplistic themes which on second glance are not so simple, exhibiting great, if not unfathomable depth. "The Receiving Of The Law" lives up to this description. At first glance it is simply an illustration of Moses receiving the Ten Commandments on Mt Sinai. But as one begins to move away from this central icon, one begins to note numerous elements, throughout the painting, which seem strange and out of place. Indeed, the more one looks, the more one finds, and the more questions are raised.

Chagall employed symbols which beg to be deciphered. Of course Chagall, like all good artists, denied employing any symbols:

“If a symbol should be discovered in a painting of mine, it was not my intention. It is a result I did not seek. It is something that may be found afterwards, and which can be interpreted according to taste.”

He said this, of course, to maintain the intrigue that ever draws the interest of onlookers back to the piece to find ever new depths. Indeed, art, by definition, is a composition given to interpretation, the artist himself merely supplying the canvas upon which every viewer is free to elaborate his understanding. Interpretation, we might say, is something of an art itself. A good interpretation, it must be emphasized, is not one that reveals the mind of the artist, *per se*, but one that cogently and coherently explains all the elements of the piece.

In this, my interpretation of “The Receiving of the Law”, I will attempt to understand what exactly is the great import of the receiving of the law. The first point that we can already make here at the outset of our investigation is that the name of the piece flips the focus of the event from God to Humanity. That is, Chagall calls his piece “the *Receiving* of the Law,” whereas in religious literature it is called “the *Giving* of the Law.” This painting is to focus on the impact of the receiving as opposed to the giving. It is a nuance that already helps us realize the perspective of the piece.

In consonance, God is confined to a relatively small, though not insignificant, corner of the piece. In the upper right-hand corner, God is portrayed as being in a cloud, just as the verses explain – see Ex. 19:9. The cloud is white and black, giving expression to the idea that while God is light and love, he is also awesome and fearful; or in the more traditional notation, God is perceived to act according to the primary attributes of mercy (*hesed*) and judgment (*din*). Note also that God's face is covered. In a previous version Chagall showed a face, but here in this advanced version Chagall is faithful to the verse: “And He said: Thou canst not see My face, for man shall not see Me and live” (Ex. 33:20).

The “cloud of God” also is said to have covered the mountain (Ex. 24:15-16, 19:16) and this explains why the entire mountain is white and cloud-like. Also of note here is that the

mountain is shown cutting the painting in to two. This bifurcation is typical of Chagall pieces. Here, the mountain is used to separate between the physical event – below the mountain, and the spiritual event everywhere else in the painting. This vast yellow space taking up the majority of the painting can be seen as highlighting the vast import of “Torah From Heaven” and the historic implications of its reception by Moses.

Moses is seen bigger than life, bridging the two worlds. This depiction is supported by the Midrash that teaches that never was there a created being that mastered the upper worlds like Moses (Ex. R. 28:1). This Midrash goes on to describe the giving of the Tablets, such that God held the Tablets with 2 hands and Moses held with 2 hands, and there were 2 handbreadths between them – precisely as our painting depicts the moment. Worthy of note here is that while the Midrash gives voice to the proximity of Moses to God, it is Chagall’s depiction that shows visually just how close Moses was to God – and perhaps in this, just how close all humans can come, if they but grasp hold of the law.

Note that Moses is floating in the air, his feet floating above the mountain. It can be said that this represents the notion that revelation removes the basis of moral law from man (be it his heart, ala Hume, or his mind, ala Kant), rather there is no “grounding” of the law on earth but only in Heaven.

Note also that Moses is depicted in the same tones of white and gray as the cloud covered mountain, reflecting the description of the text which explains how Moses went “into the cloud” (Ex. 24:18). Furthermore, the Gem (Shab. 88b, s.v. R. Nahum) describes Moses as being enveloped in the cloud.

Now, within the cloud of God we can see an outline in the exact same form of the Tablets being handed to Moses, thus representing that this is a divine gift, kept with God, indeed, reflecting God himself, as the Zohar teaches: “Torah is nothing but God” (Zohar, Beshalach 44a). The symbol of the tablets as representing the whole Torah is made the pointy crown above the tablet outline, recalling the Mishna (Avot 4:13) that teaches, “there are 3 crowns: the crown of Torah...”

Now, so precious is this Torah, this text that is a reflection of the divine, that the Gem. (Shab. 88b-89a) tells of great opposition displayed by the angels in heaven when they saw Moses, a “being of flesh and blood,” come to retrieve this heavenly treasure. They argued

that man was not worthy of so valuable a gift, but Moses, at God's behest, argued that the commandments of the Torah, as encapsulated in the ten commandments,¹ are of value specifically to beings of flesh and blood and not to heavenly angels. The Torah is not a book for angels, it is a book for human beings who must strive to become like angels by following its moral dictums.

This notion of the Torah as guidebook, providing humanity with the moral and spiritual direction to perfect themselves and their world, is represented beautifully by the angel, in the background just below Moses's extended hand, flying away with the Torah held lovingly in his arms. The angel is painted very faint, because, it can be said, his opposition fades away under the persuasive arguments made by Moses.

Now the event of the giving of the Torah is a momentous event, not only for the Jewish people, but for all of creation. The Torah (Dev. 4:32) teaches:

For ask now of the days past, which were before thee, since the day that God created man upon the earth, and from the one end of heaven unto the other, whether there hath been any such thing as this great thing is, or hath been heard like it?

The verse is emphasizing that there was never anything like this event in all of creation – implying that this event is a kind of act of creation. Indeed, the Zohar (Ber. 56a, Terumah 168a) teaches that what Adam and Eve had destroyed in the Garden of Eden, the Jews at Sinai had rectified (see my “Until You don't know” essay). The event of the receiving of the Torah is one that picks up where creation had left off. Where Adam and Eve rejected God's law, now a people accepts that law – *naaseh venishma* – to be partners with God in perfecting creation. The Midrash (Ex.R. 28:1) hints at the “creative” nature of the event when, in describing the moment that God handed the Tablets to Moses, refers to God as “the one Who said, “let there be a world.”

The painting gives expression to this in the upper left-hand corner which has a quarter sphere – representing the globus that is our world. Above this edge of our world is sketched an angel (perhaps denoting the angels consulted at the moment of Creation),

¹ Rashi (???)

along with a man and women, i.e., Adam and Eve. While hard to decipher, it appears there are also birds and perhaps a tree. In any case, the depiction of the Angel above and the couple below are elements found prominently in Chagall's own painting of Creation (see my source sheet). This scene, again, comes to emphasize the momentous importance of the giving of the Torah, comparing it with the importance of the creation itself.

And indeed, the Midrash (PDRE ch. 40) describes all of creation shaking at the event – that is, all of creation is being affected. This Midrash goes on to explain that all the people who were and all that will be, “till the end of the generations” were present at the event. The people that were, standing now in resurrection, are depicted in the cloud with God in the upper right-hand side of the painting. The people that will be are depicted all around the painting.

We can see the notion of the chain of generations all present all around the edges of the painting. Starting at the bottom left corner, we see the greatest concentration of people in the piece. They represent the entire Jewish people actually present at the event, precisely where the verse says the attended: at the bottom of the mountain (Ex. 19:17). As interesting aside, the placement of the people could also be seen as being “under the mountain” which gives expression to the Talmudic teaching that teaches “that the Holy One Blessed Be He, overturned the mountain upon them like an [inverted] cask,² and said to them, ‘if you accept the Torah all is well, but if not, then there will be your grave’” (Shabbat 88a).

As we look upward from the crowd along the left edge of the piece, we arrive at another “bottom of the mountain” where we find the golden calf and worshippers. This, of course, took place during the 40-day period, clearly later than when the people watched Moses ascend the mountain to receive the Torah. Besides taking us forward in time, the calf appears not be gold like the background around it, but much redder in hue, perhaps taking us even further forward to the time of the Red Heifer which the Midrash (Num. R. 19:8; also Tos. Moed K. 28a) teaches provides atonement for the very sin of the Golden Calf.

² Ritva (s.v. *ka'ifa*) explains that the textual impetus for this idea is based on the verse's use of the word “*b'tachtit*” – in the bottom – implying “within the underneath” of the mountain.

As we move upward from the golden calf, we see the lovers (a parallel drawing of Chagall's in which he depicts he and his wife), behind them (in an earlier version) is a rooster, known to be a symbol of fertility in Chagall's works (and is often seen together with lovers) and giving expression to the fertility of the Jews throughout the generations. (It could be that Chagall uses the "rooster" as a symbol of fertility because the Talmud [Ber. 22a] warns scholars to "not be like roosters" also seeking to sleep with their wives).

As we look rightward from the lovers, we see sketches of the Vitebsk ghetto, and houses that go on backward to what seems like infinity, depicting the seemingly infinite exile (galut). There are people scattered, here and there, amongst the houses, for, despite the fertility of the Jewish people, we always remained few in number, in accord with Moses' prophecy (Dev. 4:27):

And the Lord shall scatter you among the peoples, and ye shall be left few in number among the nations, whither the Lord shall lead you away.

A reflection of this sad state of affairs, is a man (on the lower right hand side of the painting) dressed in green lamenting. It is an almost exact replica of the lamenting Jerimiah painted by Chagall (see source sheet). Jerimiah was the great prophet of the destruction and exile of the first Temple (9:14-17) and is thus seen here lamenting "to the end of the generations." But Jerimiah is also the one who prophesied the ultimate return of the Jews in the end of days (33:10-12), in which the voice of the bride and groom will be heard again in Judea and Jerusalem. This is seen depicted in the couple with baby, directly above, indeed, connected to, Jerimiah.

And as we move up from the couple, we move up in time, to King David, who is the progenitor of the Messiah (see Rambam, Hil. Mel. 11:1). That this is king David, there can be no doubt, as the figure here matches most precisely the "David" painted by Chagall (see source sheet). Both King David and Jerimiah face away, off the edge the painting, looking away from the history unfolding, for, though they know the redemption will come, it will come only after a long and arduous history that they cannot bear to witness. The only other figure looking away is a man in the bottom left corner, with a satchel on his shoulder, a depiction typical of the Jews leaving the ghettos to assimilate in the new world opened by emancipation. Looking away here is then, looking away from the Torah, from that partnership that God called upon the Jewish people to join. The three figures looking

away all symbolize this looking away from God's call. The Jew looks away – with a kind of naïve wonder on his face – and abandons the call. Jeremiah looks away – with tears in his eyes – distraught at the consequences. Messiah looks away – facing down in sadness – unable to come to complete creation.

At the bottom right there is a figure who is clearly Aaron Hacoheh, dressed in the priestly purple (argaman) with the Hoshen worn only by the high priest – depicted as a checkerboard on his chest. Aaron is carrying a menorah, also the responsibility of the priest to maintain the light.³ But Aaron is saddened, head down. This is because he witnessed, took part in, the making of the Golden Calf which is explained by Talmud as being the root of all sorrow: “No punishment comes to the world in which there is not a part of payment for the sin of the Golden Calf” (Sanhedrin 102a).⁴ Chagall notes this connection by placing Aaron at the bottom of the mountain which, as we follow it up to the opposite end, we find the golden calf. Chagall also gives expression to the ultimate sorrow of the last generation, the holocaust in which 6 million perished, by making the 7 candle menorah to show only 6 candles – 6 candles being an icon of the memory of the 6 million (also in Chagall's other works, see e.g., corpse surrounded by 6 candles).

But it is the priest, who at once, represents the memory of the suffering as well as the remedy, the faith, the “avoda”, that has kept the Jewish people alive, despite all the sorrow that has been endured. <<See also R. Soloveitchik – Days of Deliverance, p.140-142 wherein he brings the Midrash (BamR 15:6) that talks about Aaron and the Menorah lights as being eternal.>> There will be a redeemer, a King David, he will come to the people chosen by God to receive the commandments, to keep the commandments, to perfect the world through the commandments.

Nevertheless, man must fulfill his role in the destiny of creation. R. Soloveitchik (Fate and Destiny, p.54) explains as follows:

The individual is tied to his people both with chains of fate and with the bonds of destiny... The covenant in Egypt/Fate: shared circumstances, shared suffering, shared responsibility. The covenant of Sinai/Destiny: What is the nature of the

³ (Source ???).

⁴ (see for ideas on this: <http://www.mesora.org/stillpaying.html>)

covenant of destiny? Destiny in the life of a people, as in the life of an individual, signifies a deliberate and conscious existence that the people has chosen out of its own free will and in which it finds the full realization of its historical being. Its existence, in place of simply being the experience of an unalterable reality into which the people has been thrust, now appears as the experience of an act possessing teleological dimensions, replete with movement, ascent, striving, and attaining.

So the message of Sinai, of the Brit Torah, is Destiny – God gave Moses His Law to bring to the Jewish People, in so doing, he made Moses and Israel His partners in Creation – it was a moment that all of humanity is a party to – this moment had influence on all of creation to the end of time. In a sense, there was set into motion a kind of fate to the world. On the other hand, there is always free will – but it is limited to the covenant – to yirat shamayim (“everything is in the hands of heaven except the fear of heaven”). We turn fate into destiny when we choose to fulfill our role in Creation.

In a sense, finding our destiny in the fate of creation is just like interpreting art. We know the creator of the artwork had a purpose in mind, a kind of fate to the piece. On the other hand, it is up to each and every one of us to find our purpose within it. Interpretating art, is in a way, like interpreting life. Of course, the Creator of the piece we call our world, told us that it is about doing his will, about fixing the world; but it is up to us to find our way to fulfill it, to fix it.

That is what “The Receiving of the Law” is all about.

~~~~~

Post script – behind Aaron in the lower right corner there is a sketch of man looking in – this seems to be the artist Chagall himself, mouth open, awed by it all – just as he is described in biographies as looking back on history, his personal tragic history in Vitebsk. Here he is seen almost as a reflection of Moses (with beard and all), for Chagall’s original name was Moses.